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A Skeptic's 11-Year Study of the Assassination of John Kennedy

Harold Weisberg, of Frederick, holds several books he has written, challenging the Warren Commission Report.



By HENRY SCARUPA

LIFE hasn't been the same for Harold Weisberg since President Kennedy's assassination. At first the Frederick writer shared the nation's shock at the calculated killing of a well-liked president. Shock changed to disbelief when the Warren Commission issued its report. A former Senate investigator for the old LaFollette Civil Liberties committee and later intelligence analyst for the wartime OSS, Mr. Weisberg questioned the findings with a well-honed skepticism. In the years that followed he emerged as the commission's bitterest and most unrelenting critic.

Almost continuously since 1964 he has delved into the assassination and its probe by federal authorities. He has written five books, four of which he published himself, all challenging the official conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot the President. The Warren Commission, he argues, began with the premise Oswald was guilty and simply assembled facts supporting that conclusion.

Mr. Weisberg's latest book, "Whitewash IV," came out late last year. The bulk of the work reproduces a heretofore secret transcript of the January 27, 1964 executive session of the Warren Commission. At the meeting members discussed at length the rumor Oswald was an undercover agent for the FBI. Significantly, Allen Dulles, one of the commission's seven members and former CIA head, confided that the directors of the CIA and FBI might lie to anyone except the President to protect covert operations and undercover people. Mr. Weisberg had been maintaining as much all along.

To obtain the important document the

writer filed suit in federal court under the Freedom of Information Act, a common enough practice for him. He lost the case but the National Archives, custodian of the commission files, suddenly reversed itself and released the document.

During this period Mr. Weisberg digressed several times, once to write a long theoretical work he called "Coup d'Etat." In it he postulated a new method of policy change previously unknown in the U.S., characterized by the leader's elimination. Accordingly, John Fitzgerald Kennedy's death led to a turnabout of the liberalizing trend sparked by the young president. The same held true for Martin Luther King's assassination. The book never found a publisher.

Sections of "Coup d'Etat" appeared in a subsequent book, "Frame Up," dealing with the King case. In a further digression Mr. Weisberg spent several thousand hours investigating that crime and, predictably, absolved James Earl Ray of the murder in his own mind. He later became Ray's unpaid investigator and worked with the convicted man's attorneys at last October's evidentiary hearings in Memphis.

The author has another book, "Post-Mortem"—the biggest bombshell of them all, he calls it—waiting to be published. Lack of money to bring it out himself has kept the manuscript in his desk drawer. He still owes several thousand dollars in

printing costs for the latest "Whitewash." On a recent gray spring day Mr. Weisberg, wearing two heavy sweaters, worked at his home with the heat turned off to save oil. The temperature inside was 59 degrees. His wife, Lillian, who works for an income tax firm, has become the breadwinner.

"Post-Mortem," according to Mr. Weisberg, focuses on the medical aspects of Kennedy's assassination and includes new evidence he unearthed in Dallas. "Except for the fact John Kennedy was killed, there is no truthful medical statement about him," the author maintains, as he discusses his work at his suburban home. "It's that shocking. It (the medical evidence) was falsified deliberately, some of it

things are coming up. It could be accidental with everybody going crazy, but suppose it's deliberate. This man isn't behaving like a guilty man. One of the most obvious possibilities is somebody wants to shut his mouth . . . permanently." Later that day he watched television as Jack Ruby fired the fatal shots. Mr. Weisberg was doubly shaken. He hadn't expected events to move so swiftly.

"Remember, I was a political analyst in intelligence," the author explains his prescience. "That means I had to do work with a limited amount of initial raw material and reach conclusions from less material than ultimately might be available. Once you get into the habit it becomes automatic."

accidentally, some perhaps because of what was construed to be national interest. I think the different people involved may well have had different motives. But the deliberateness is beyond question.

Mr. Weisberg feels he has enough material already researched to write for another 10 years at the same frenetic pace. His study contains eight full-sized file cabinets, and he has additional papers stored elsewhere. He has yet to fully examine some 2,000 pages of FBI files in his possession. All these, he insists, have been acquired legally.

Like most Americans the author has a vivid recollection of the moment he first heard of President Kennedy's death. He operated a chicken farm near Hyattsville. Fond of classical music he was listening to a transistor radio as he gathered eggs. Suddenly a news flash broke in. The events of the next few days troubled him greatly. The case seemed to be going senselessly awry.

Recalling the day of Oswald's death, Mr. Weisberg says, "I turned to my wife at breakfast and said, 'You know, Honey, that poor sonofabitch is going to be killed.' And she said, 'What do you mean?' And I said, 'It isn't going to be possible to try him. All of a sudden these prejudicial

Within a week of the Dallas tragedy Mr. Weisberg sent his literary agent an outline of a proposed magazine article, alleging the FBI and Dallas police were aware of Oswald before the assassination. Editors drew back from the controversial idea; the agent dropped Mr. Weisberg. Then and there he resolved to do a hard-hitting book.

He began in September, 1964 right after the Warren Report was issued. Using a voice-activated tape recorder he made verbal notes and comments as he read the 900-page report. His wife, meanwhile, transcribed the tapes, eventually over 20 six-hour reels. By November when the 26 volumes of supporting testimony and evidence came out, Mr. Weisberg was free to tackle the more than 10 million words. Behind him were his own notes of over 300,000 words. Four weeks after he set out to write "Whitewash I" the book was completed, admittedly without much polishing. Mrs. Weisberg compiled the index. Between them they wore out an electric typewriter.

The work pattern which took shape in those early days remains with Mr. Weisberg. "I don't recommend it to anyone," smiles the 62-year-old Philadelphia native. "There's an awful problem of data,

the volume, and I'm not a good file clerk. I'll sit down and write a book without a written outline. I know my material that well.

"I get only six hours sleep now. But from the time I began working intensively on "Whitewash" until '70 or '71, I didn't average four hours a night sleep. If I have to, I can still go around the clock. The only unique thing is the way I apply myself. I work hard in the sense a plumber or a carpenter works hard."

If the writing moved quickly, publishing barely inched along. After reading the manuscript a senior editor at a New York publishing company talked enthusiastically of making a best-seller but the publisher, to Mr. Weisberg's astonishment,

backed out of the deal. But he was impressed with my book and introduced it to another major house." Again the pattern repeated itself, initial interest followed by rejection based on a policy rather than an editorial decision.

Suspecting behind-the-scenes maneuvering against him, Mr. Weisberg tried to have "Whitewash" published abroad. He sent a manuscript to Germany. It never reached its destination. He sent another only to have it disappear from the publisher's office. Letters were delayed without explanation and then arrived all at once in a flood. A British publisher tentatively agreed to do the book, but first had a Oxford historian read it. The man debunked the work. Some time later Mr. Weisberg heard it rumored the scholar had longstanding ties with intelligence. By the time an Italian publisher accepted the book, the author had collected over 100 rejection slips.

At home he decided to become an "underground publisher" and produce the book himself by photo-offset. When the paperback appeared in 1966, interest in the Kennedy assassination was at high pitch.

Mr. Weisberg sent copies to all mem-

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bers and staff of the Warren Commission, to J. Edgar Hoover and to the Secret Service chief, asking them to point out any errors and to add their comments. Only one person acknowledged the book, a former commission member and Michigan congressman, Jerry Ford. Ford thanked the author but declined to take the bait on comments.

In reporting on "Whitewash" the New York Times wrote: "... Mr. Weisberg questions so many points made by the (Warren) report that the effect is blunted—it is difficult to believe any institution could be as inept, careless, wrong or venal as he implies."

The author expected a more positive response. In the back of his mind he had hoped "Whitewash" would nudge the media to undertake investigations of their own and eventually create a popular groundswell clamoring for re-investigation of the assassination. In retrospect he acknowledges the naivete of his thinking.

At one point to get a reaction he directly challenged a former Warren Commission counsel, at the time a high elected official in a large city. "I accused him of suborning perjury and dared him to sue me," Mr. Weisberg goes on. "I did that after I published it (the charge), and he was silent. I went there, notified the newspapers this was what I was going to do, and I did it at a public gathering covered by the press. To this day he is without protest. I've called people liars. I've said they faked evidence. And there's no chance of a libel suit. I'm not careless."

Mr. Weisberg drew consolation from the fact a great many Americans—over 60 per cent, according to polls at the time—shared his doubts about the Warren Report. Included were such influential figures as Senator Richard B. Russell, who had been a member of the commission. To the end Russell believed in a conspiracy, according to Mr. Weisberg who had contact with him. Privately, the Georgia Democrat confided he felt federal authorities had deceived commission members on Oswald's background and on ballistics evidence.

At the final executive session of the Warren Commission, Russell and two other members voiced their objections. Inexplicably, no full transcript of the session exists although members thought their objections were being taken down. What exists, in effect, is what Mr. Weisberg calls a "faked transcript," a paraphrase of the meeting with all dissenting viewpoints edited out.

If "Whitewash" didn't bring Mr. Weisberg great success, it at least provided him with notoriety. Beginning in 1966 he made the rounds of colleges, lecturing. After his talks students would often invite him to bull sessions in the dormitories lasting through the night.

He also became a steady guest on radio

and TV shows. He was invited to the taping of one New York television program which, he later learned, was rigged to demolish his book. Planted in the audience were four lawyers. Mr. Weisberg was so sure of his ground and knew his material so well, he said he outfoxed his adversaries for the two hours or more of the confrontation.

When the show was aired at midnight the author was home in Frederick, watching. At 2.30 A.M. the phone began to ring.

"I never got to sleep that night," Mr. Weisberg recalls. "Total strangers. What an emotional outpouring. The book was the bestselling work of non-fiction in New York that week. Bookstores sold 300 copies a day."

The author has never been able to afford to advertise his books. As a self-publisher he has been almost completely ignored by book reviewers. Talk shows have provided virtually the only publicity. Radio hosts from over the country call to discuss his books. On these occasions Mr. Weisberg usually gives his Route 8, Frederick-mailing address and other information on how to acquire the books. None at present is sold through bookstores. Grudgingly, though of necessity, he handles all

aspects of book sales himself, including wrapping and addressing packages.

From the first Mr. Weisberg's investigatory and publishing ventures have been hand-to-mouth. In 1967 as the result of a book on Oswald he was called to testify before a New Orleans grand jury in the Garrison probe. He took advantage of the opportunity to carry out his own investigations in the Louisiana city. Short of money he was put up by two different persons who knew and admired his work. A sympathetic auto dealer lent him a car. For two weeks Mr. Weisberg subsisted mainly on vitamin pills, powdered milk and 19-cent hamburgers. New Orleans cost him 15 pounds in weight. Another time he was away from home a month and spent, apart from air fare, under \$100.

As the writer dug deeper into the details of the assassination a series of

'I Have a Phrase for These People—the Dedicated Wrong'



Mr. Weisberg's files include copies of FBI reports on the Assassination of JFK.

strange happenings, too remarkable for coincidence, began to take place. Manuscripts and letters to publishers continued to disappear and then at times reappeared months later. As a countermeasure Mr. Weisberg began to drop off mail at post offices where he had not been before. The ploy worked. One errant manuscript was returned to him after it had been missing six weeks. The post office reported the package had broken open, spilling the contents. The puzzled author observed that none of the 600 pages had been creased, stained or marred in any way, unlikely if the explanation were true. "We're now finding out," he says, "that certain government agencies had a policy of doing this."

More than once Mr. Weisberg lost bag-

gage under mysterious circumstances. On a flight from Minneapolis to Kansas City both tape recorder and typewriter disappeared. The plane was searched to no avail. Three days later they reappeared in Florida. The tape recorder had been fixed to play back but not record. The typewriter was badly smashed. The case containing it showed no marks on the outside.

A few months ago important documents on the Watergate scandal disappeared from his home. There was no sign of break-in. Nothing was disturbed. The documents were part of a mass of papers filed in his idiosyncratic way. "A professional robbery," Mr. Weisberg reasons. "It could have happened while I was here. Maybe someone I trusted slipped it under his shirt while I wasn't looking. People come here socially, four and five at a time and sometimes they bring strangers along.

"It's also a simple matter to pick locks. Then there's another possibility because the robbery was so pinpointed. A bug. I can't begin to pay the cost of a sweep. And I'm not going to live that way. I can't lead a paranoid life."

Mr. Weisberg claims to have evidence showing the government has had more than casual interest in his activities. "I have carbon copies of federal surveillance reports," he says. "And live witnesses, too. Tape recorded interviews. Dated. These people finally rebelled at what they had to do. That's the only way I could have gotten this."

For his part, Mr. Weisberg has been tireless in pressuring federal agencies for documents and information. Although he spent years in the National Archives in Washington going through 300 cubic feet of Warren Commission files, the trail for him has always led farther on. At times documents he asked for were suddenly reclassified or alleged not to exist. Others simply disappeared. Over the years he has filed suit six times under the Freedom of Information Act, achieving success in three instances. In one case he acted as his own lawyer.

He spent eight years trying to force the government to release scientific test results of ballistic evidence. The matter finally went to the Supreme Court, which ruled against him. He feels the government's refusal to yield the data shows the evidence is weak and refutable. "Do you think for one minute," he asks, "that if the spectographic analysis gave any support to the official explanation of how John Kennedy was killed, they'd be keeping it a secret?"

Asked if he has any suspicions who may have killed John Kennedy, Mr. Weisberg pauses thoughtfully before answering, "I addressed this in 'Coup d'Etat' by amending a term attributed to Eisenhower. I call it the intelligence-military-industrial complex. You're seeing it now. I was talking about it in 1968. It wasn't necessary for people to sit down, put their heads together and conspire. This kind of thing is largely spontaneous, except for the actual execution.

"I have a phrase for these people—the dedicated wrong. They're more dangerous than people who are deliberately dishonest. They think they're the only ones who understand. For them all illegalities are right and proper just as long as someone above tells them they're right. It's an American variation of the Nuremberg belief."

Despite the setbacks Mr. Weisberg is convinced investigation of the Kennedy assassination will be reopened in the future, with far different conclusions next time. He takes heart from the new generation showing burning interest in the assassination history. He receives a dozen or

more letters daily, ranging from 16-year-olds to retired Army generals. Some drive long distances to discuss details of the Dallas tragedy. Public pressure from such people, he feels, will eventually force Congress to move.

In line with this, Representative Henry Martinez (D., Texas) introduced a resolution in February calling for a congressional investigation of all recent assassinations including that of John Kennedy. West

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Coast supporters have already collected 250,000 signatures on a petition supporting the move.

"It's going to take a lot more public pressure than any other question in modern history," Mr. Weisberg concedes. "But I think it would do more to restore faith in government and society than any one thing. It could lead to a new spirit in the country."

Looking back on his work of the past 11 years Mr. Weisberg sighs soulfully. Initially he had planned to do just the one book, but early on the subject took firm hold of him. Recently, several educational institutions expressed interest in his files and working papers. An arrangement might be worked out, he feels, allowing scholars and graduate students to take on part of the burden, initially under his direction. The process would provide a valuable learning experience. "Ninety-five per cent of what a good intelligence agency needs is in the public domain," he stresses. "It's

'It's Going to Take a Lot More Public Pressure,' Says Harold Weisberg, Writer and Skeptic

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how you make sense of it."

Mr. Weisberg, who sees himself more of a truthseeker than assassination buff, long ago made a cause of his doubts. "I'm a first generation American," he explains. "My father came from the Ukraine and my mother from Bessarabia. So when I was born in this country, I was born with a big debt."

"All of history was turned around when John Kennedy was killed. I don't think anybody in his right mind would say what's happened since is good for the country. You have a very real question here of the integrity of the institutions of society."

The author takes umbrage that people often regard him as a radical. Some local businessmen have even admitted worrying they might get into trouble for having dealings with him.

"I couldn't be more establishmentarian," protests Mr. Weisberg. "People have the wrong concept of what serves the interests of the establishment. Vested interests equate their own narrow selfish interests with those of all society. And, of course, everyone else is a radical in their eyes."

"I'm a genuine law and order man. I don't believe there can be a decent society without proper ordering of that society. I'm opposed to abuses of it. I'm trying to make the system work the way it's supposed to." □